Kaajal Shah interviews Chris Korda for Say What? Magazine

Part 1 (July 20, 2020)

You spoke to me about two distinct events (back in America) that first sparked your interest / voice in this field (i.e. human awareness / environmental collective consciousness).

My mother claimed that my environmental awareness resulted from her reading Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" while she was pregnant with me. What I can say for sure is that growing up in New York City gave me above-average exposure to overpopulation and environmental degradation.

The genesis of "Apologize to the Future" was a 2008 presentation by Dan Miller called "A Really Inconvenient Truth," which is available on YouTube. Miller worked for Al Gore, promoting Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth." Gore strictly limited the amount of bad news in his film in order to keep people from despairing, but Miller felt that "people like to be told the truth, even if it's not very pretty" and so he made his own film. About halfway through, there's a slide titled "What can you do?" and the first item on the slide is "Ask your children for forgiveness." In a cartoon, there would have been a lightbulb over my head.

Over time, the concept of apologizing to your children led me to the more abstract concept of apologizing to future generations. As a thought experiment, I asked myself a simple question: how will future generations view us? I came to the conclusion that they'll regard us with bitter skepticism at best. Future generations will justifiably feel that we abandoned them on a wrecked planet. Of course that's assuming future generations are lucky—or should I say unlucky—enough to exist.

It's a lyrical piece that translates into a conceptual piece - was this the idea from the outset. How long did it take to formulate the 1200 words.

The lyrics took me about a year. From the outset, the central theme was facing reality. As long as people remain convinced that reality is just whatever they happen to believe, we have no chance to survive. As Philip K. Dick supposedly said, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." The album opens with Einstein's memorable quip that "the moon is really out there." Einstein's point is that the moon is real whether you believe in it or not.

We need to realize the truth of what we've done. In an eye-blink of geological time, we've damaged our life-support system enough to make earth increasingly uninhabitable even for us, never mind for our nonhuman fellow travelers. Admitting it intellectually isn't good enough. We need to feel it.

We've engaged in monstrously self-defeating behavior, and it's no surprise that people don't want to hear about it. People love heroic tales and want to imagine themselves as the heroes of

their own stories. But from the point of view of future generations, we're the opposite of heroes: we're sociopathic villains who committed horrific crimes against the future. As long as we're incapable of conceptualizing our crimes, we can't repent them. Without remorse there's no restitution. If we don't think we're doing anything wrong, why should we change course? Why shouldn't we just keep on partying until the bitter end?

Your former work has been described as culture jamming - I like this term. Would you say that's also relevant here.

The early Church of Euthanasia's snarky sloganeering is no longer appropriate. Mass extinction is underway and tragedy on that scale demands respect. It's a time for the direct, heartfelt communication that's so lacking in our national and global discourse. Along with COVID-19, we're suffering from a pandemic of solipsism, the mistaken notion that only the self is real. Rejecting reality leads us to an infantile world of made-up facts. What's needed is the proverbial glass of cold water in the face. The truth of our predicament must be spoken plainly so that everyone can understand it. We're hairless apes clinging to a ball of rock in a vast cosmos that's utterly indifferent to our fate. We grow up or we die.

From the point of view of nonhumans, on balance, our extinction would be a great blessing, not that this would (or even should) matter to us. Though I've said it time and again, it bears repeating: "Save the Planet, Kill Yourself" is absurdist neo-Dadaism. In reality, the planet will be fine. It's we, and our fascinatingly complex civilization, that are critically endangered. If we're "saving" anything, we're saving future generations of ourselves. It might help to be honest about this. In order to have a future, we need to plan rationally for our long-term survival. This should be obvious but apparently it isn't. Culture jamming and similar tactics have failed to communicate this adequately, so more direct methods are called for.

How does it differentiate itself from the thematics of agitprop associated with your previous titles.

Genetics is just patterns of information. The patterns that are best adapted to their environment leave behind the most descendants, and the less fit patterns can't compete and die out. Death is always indispensably present, trimming away unhelpful changes. Homo sapiens has been a very successful pattern, but 99% of species that ever evolved on earth are now extinct, and there's little reason to suppose humanity will avoid that fate; on the contrary, we're busy hastening it.

There's no justice in evolution, no good or bad species. There's only fitness for survival in whatever conditions prevail. Like COVID-19, cancer has as much right to exist as we do, because it's just another successful pattern. We've been doing everything in our power to destabilize Earth's patterns, and now the bill has come due. The injustice is that the worst offenders plan to abscond without paying. It's their children and grandchildren who will pay.

Humans have fatally accelerated earth's entropy. As the Man in Black bleakly observes in the third season of "Westworld," we're agents of chaos, like "maggots eating a corpse." The Church of Euthanasia's mission has changed from condemning humans to feeling sorry for them, because condemnation is pointlessly cruel now that most of the damage is done. It's no

longer about avoiding environmental catastrophe, because that ship has sailed; it's about preparing for the psychological impact of societal collapse.

You contemporaneously use the words ‘direct’ ‘heartfelt’ ‘rage’ ‘bitter resentment’ - do you think all 4 can co-exist

All of these adjectives are responses to being “born into a disaster porn.” Our planet is capable of releasing vastly more CO2 than all of humanity's activities combined, and has done so in the past. If that happens, it will no longer matter what we do. Even if we stopped emitting CO2 the next day, it would still be “game over” for us. Permafrost alone contains nearly twice the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere, and it’s currently melting at a furious pace. Just extrapolating from current rates of sea level rise, coastal cities will be submerged by 2100. Most cities are coastal, due to their historical dependence on ocean-borne cargo.

We’ll soon be busy moving our airports. Impacts will very likely arrive sooner than expected, because the scientific process is inherently conservative, and because its results are watered down by governments keen to preserve the status quo. I face these facts every day, and if I can face them, you can too. I transmute my rage and grief into action, and you can do the same.

What would you say to those who do find the album overwhelming. How else do we talk about human extinction…

The album should overwhelm, because its subject is the worst crisis humanity has ever faced. The problem is that we’re insufficiently alarmed. It’s as if we’re on the Titanic, and it’s already half sunk with water pouring in, and we’re still saying the captain will take care of it so have another drink. We should be responding to the crisis and we aren’t. We should’ve been responding to the crisis thirty years ago. Time has passed, the crisis is by now far advanced, and those of us lucky enough to be relatively insulated from its accelerating impacts are living in dreamland. The goal is for us to wake up before it’s too late, and so the album is harsh for the same reason an alarm clock is harsh. You may not like hearing your alarm clock but it’s performing a necessary function.

William R. Catton's book “Overshoot” is as true today as when he wrote it back in 1982. Infinite growth is the ideology of the cancer cell. People will reduce their demands on ecosystems and learn to value long-term survival above all else, or the future won't include us. And that's an optimistic scenario, because it assumes we’re sufficiently rational to change our aggregate behavior rapidly enough to make a difference. Until the Keeling curve reverses direction and atmospheric CO2 falls below 350 PPM, our rationality is an unproven conjecture. In the words of Nobel Prize winner Joshua Lederberg, “The survival of the human species is not a preordained evolutionary program.”

You’re not the first to see and write about the human race through the eyes of oppressed future generations, but perhaps the first in the context of electronic ‘pop’. You go on to define it as electro-rap. For those that want to know what that is?

As far as I know “Apologize to the Future” is the first album entirely devoted to the pivotal issues of the 21st century: climate change, economic inequality, intergenerational injustice, anti-natalism, the singularity, and human extinction. The novels of Paolo Bacigalupi helped me visualize the human impacts of drastic climate change more clearly. Paul Theroux’s “O-Zone” provided useful caricatures of the super-rich. But I get most of my ammunition from conventional news sources. I also read a ton of climate science books and papers, and try to follow trends in artificial intelligence.

The album fuses rap with polymeter electro, techno, and breakbeat. When I heard Kate Tempest’s “Europe Is Lost” in 2016, it opened a door for me. I realized that I could rap, but in my own way, without imitating existing styles. I was already aware of rap’s connection to radical politics and poetry, as seen for example in The Last Poets, but there was a lot I didn’t know, so I started researching rap. I studied the classics, but also more modern examples. Lucas Joyner’s “I’m Not Racist” interested me because it cleverly uses role-playing to bridge opposing points of view. It’s fascinating how much rap has changed over time. It’s become a lot more diverse, and I’m honored to contribute to that diversity.

How does your voice differ to the conversation already out there

I’m outside the box, and not only in terms of lyrics. As with my previous Perlon release, all the tracks on “Apologize to the Future” are in complex polymeter—meaning they use multiple prime meters simultaneously—and were written using my custom polymeter MIDI sequencer. Most of the time signatures are odd, for example “Overshoot” is in 27, “Singularity” is in 11, and “Changing Climate” is in 17. By the time I started working on this record my sequencer was fully-featured, so the result is more balanced and probably more similar to my earlier work in terms of sound design.

During this same period I also released an album of generative solo piano and solo guitar for Mental Groove, titled “Polymeter.” I began studying atonal music in 2016, and developed my own tools for working with atonality. Atonal music often features what I call the “cat walking around on the piano,” meaning clusters of chromatic notes played at once. These clusters can be unsettling and produce a characteristic “horror movie” sound. I developed methods to avoid clusters, along with techniques for changing tonality gradually, similarly to how watercolor painters use wet paper and let the colors bleed into each other. Atonality is most obvious on the track “Overshoot.”

At this time I was also experimenting with polymeter breakbeat, another nonexistent category. The concept is simple: write in polymeter as usual but instead of triggering individual drum hits, trigger samples of live drumming. That’s featured on the album’s last track, “Exit Game.”

How would you react to the statement that your relevance has increased over the years.

It might seem like an “I told you so” moment but the situation is much too serious for that. I take no pleasure in having correctly predicted that humanity would flush its own future down the toilet. I’m invested in the survival of civilization, not just in a financial sense but emotionally and artistically. I grew up in a huge city, read widely and appreciated the richness

of culture and history from an early age. We truly stand on the shoulders of giants, and my achievements would be inconceivable without the vast accumulation of knowledge that preceded me. I'm proud to have carried on the work of my predecessors in whatever way I could.

Human civilization is the most remarkable thing ever to occur on this planet, and it's certainly worth saving. But it has inherent contradictions that threaten its survival, and that's tragic. I'm sad that more people didn't listen to me in the past, when so much damage could have been avoided. I've been sounding the alarm for nearly thirty years now, but our trajectory hasn't slowed or deviated, on the contrary we're still accelerating into catastrophe. Since disaster is no longer avoidable, the focus needs to shift to the stages of grief. We need to get past denial, and move through anger, bargaining, and depression so we can start grappling with the most important stage, acceptance. As I said in my poem "Less," it's going to hurt. For many of us, it already hurts. But pain is a good teacher.

How do you feel now that it's 'out' - which chapter in your life would you say it represents?

Parts of the album were written in Lisbon, others in Berlin, so it's possibly infused with a European sensibility. In this chapter of my life I repudiated Americanism, and especially the "know-nothing" crassness that's so vividly satirized in the film "Idiocracy." The dizzying concentrations of wealth so exhaustively detailed by Thomas Piketty diminished my hope for a soft landing.

Consider how the last Gilded Age ended: two world wars, entire cities reduced to piles of bricks and tens of millions dead. That's what it took for governments to get serious about redistributing wealth. But even if we wanted to, there isn't enough time left to repeat that ghastly history, because the climate change wolf is already loping through our wide-open door.

I was dreaming a pleasant technological dream, but events roused me from my dogmatic slumber. Our future's on the line, and the clock's running out. As sea level rises, will we rise to the occasion? Will we be heroes or villains? Will our grandchildren thank us or revile us? Will the great work of civilization be saved, or will humanity's hard-won progress be reduced to rubble? Will geoengineering save the day, or nail shut our coffin? We could belatedly heed the better angels of our nature, but we could also embody hapless Deckard in "Bladerunner," punch-drunk and staggering as Leon shouts "Wake up! Time to die!"

Part 2 (September 8, 2020)

What made you decide to devote your art to politics

I didn't. Some of my art is ideological, but much of it isn't, for example my algorithmic psychedelic art, virtual 3D pottery, sound collage, ambient and generative neoclassical music, etc. As a teenager I was already a visual artist, musician and lyricist. The Church of Euthanasia evolved later, during my thirties. It provides many opportunities to put my artistic abilities to good use, but it's a subset of my art. I came of age in the 1980s when ideological art was the

norm, but the decisive factor was heightened awareness of overpopulation and the climate crisis.

When did you realise you were different from the others ("I've always been out of the box")

I thought critically, and spoke and wrote precisely from an early age, thanks to both of my parents and a series of excellent teachers. My linguistic aptitude was obvious and often made me unpopular with my classmates. I won the reading prize every year in grade school, by reading at least one hundred books. In eighth grade my reading comprehension was tested and found to be in the 99th percentile. By then I was acutely aware of being different, and the environmental realizations that became the Church of Euthanasia two decades later had already occurred to me.

Do you believe your music can have / does have an impact on people's behaviour/decision making

I do. Culture is the primary determinant of people's behavior. My music injects climate change, intergenerational injustice, antinatalism, and human extinction into electronic music culture, where they're almost unheard of. This is *culture jamming*, the use of mainstream culture to subversively critique mainstream culture. Danny Tenaglia's 2016 remix of "Save the Planet, Kill Yourself" and Supreme licensing the Church of Euthanasia T-Shirt last year helped make overpopulation and overconsumption more topical. My music has inspired many people to take a lifetime vow of non-procreation. Whether humanity will ultimately be persuaded to value its own future remains to be seen.

We've been conditioned to get married, make babies. Isn't it natural though to procreate - this desire to want to have children? Don't you feel that we'd lose strands of culture (and humanity even) if we all stopped having children. (My father once said that you've only lived life to 50% before you have a child)

Even if I accepted the view that a child-free life is somehow unfulfilled—which of course I don't, I consider this breeder propaganda and lame post hoc justification—the unavoidable question then is who gets to breed and why? And why should the desire of individuals to have a fulfilling experience outweigh the survival of our species, or the immense suffering our profligacy inflicts on humans and nonhumans alike?

How do you influence instead of pushing people away? It's an important distinction to draw…

Art can be distinguished from ideology. Antinatalism is an ideology, for example. Promotion of an ideology is propaganda, or proselytizing if it's religious. Promoters understandably cater to people's tastes in order to more successfully influence their audience. But in art, catering to people's tastes is a serious mistake that leads to pandering. The Church of Euthanasia's effectiveness as propaganda is dubious—the human population has increased by one-third during its tenure—but its impact as art is undeniable. While making "Apologize to the Future"

my primary concern was how faithfully it realized my inspiration, not how it would influence people.

We've talked about you being outside of the box - do you consider yourself to also be on the periphery of dance music culture?

Yes. My music flaunts dance music norms in almost every respect. Rhythmically it's composed in complex polymeter, it's often harmonically challenging, it's explicitly ideological, and in the case of "Apologize to the Future," it's loquacious to an extent usually only seen in rap. The history of art is one of punctuated equilibrium, meaning dull periods of stuckness and conformity disrupted by drastic upheavals. Revolutions always come from the periphery. Dance music culture isn't a fixed thing, it's a moving target. Every time people dance to one of my tracks, we're changing dance music culture, pushing it towards the unknown.

What's your vision for this record - despite it being released on an "underground" label, its message extends far beyond… how do you want it to be received - where do you want it to be received?

"Apologize to the Future" confronts the pivotal issues of the 21st century. Ideally it would enter mainstream discussion of the climate crisis, and help people grasp the crisis in a more emotional and personal way. I hope Greta Thunberg gets to hear it. In general I hope younger people hear it, because it depicts the future from their point of view. I hope for humanity to somehow beat the odds and make it through the bottleneck with civilization intact, so that in the distant future my album will be cherished as a quaint artifact, a warning heeded.